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Foreign adventures shore up Assad's regime.

SYRIA'S IMPERIAL DREAM

BY DANIEL PIPES

IN A SPEECH last February, President Hafez al-Assad of Syria outlined his policy toward the Golan Heights, the southwestern region of Syria that was lost to Israel in 1967. "If the Israelis work to put the Golan within their borders," he warned, "we will work to put the Golan in the middle of Syria and not on the borders." As the most overt threat in some years—it implied the annexation of all of Israel to Syria—Assad's remark prompted strong verbal responses from Israel. Syria, in turn, made further warnings. Events since then have only made Syrian-

Israeli hostilities more likely, and many observers now speculate that the two countries are heading for war.

Just after the United States retaliated against Libya for terrorism in a Berlin nightclub, it became clear that Syria had masterminded the attempt to blow up an El Al plane leaving London. As evidence of Syrian complicity emerges, the likelihood of Israeli reprisal against Syria increases. But do Syria's hostile moves mean that it seeks war with Israel? Or is Assad indirectly trying to maneuver Israel to the bargaining table?

Assessing Assad's motives poses many problems, for the Syrian Arab Republic is one of the most tightly closed countries in the Middle East. Even so, two points stand out. Unlike Israel's other neighbors, Syria still seeks to destroy the Jewish state. As the Syrian foreign minister, Abd al-

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Halim Khaddam, puts it, "liquidating the Zionist presence" is the only solution to the Arab-Israeli struggle. Second, Assad's bellicosity results not from strength but from weakness. He depends on anti-Zionism to reduce the disaffection of the Syrian people from his regime.

DESCRIBING THE AREA east of the Mediterranean more than 50 years ago, the Syrian writer Omar Djabry noted the paradox that the region's distinctiveness lies precisely in the diversity of its population. With good reason, he dubbed ethnic heterogeneity the trademark of the Levant. In Syria, Arabic-speaking Sunni Moslems make up 50 percent of the population and minorities make up the other half. Islamic heresies—Alawite, Druse, Yazidi—constitute 16 percent. Christians, ten percent, divide into ten sects. Bedouins make up ten percent, and Turks, Kurds, Palestinians, and Shiites make up the rest. With a long history of ethnic hostilities, Syria could easily be engulfed in the kind of vicious enmities that have destroyed Lebanon.

Thus the fact that Assad and most of his aides come from the small, isolated, impoverished, and despised Alawite community has enormous importance. Born in 1930, Assad was the oldest of six brothers and grew up in a village not far from the Turkish border. On moving to the nearby town of Latakia in the early 1940s, he changed his name from Wahsh, meaning "wild beast" or "monster," to Assad, meaning "lion." He was only 17 years old when he volunteered in 1948 to help destroy the nascent state of Israel. He then distinguished himself as an air force pilot, rose quickly through the ranks, and by 1961 was an important political figure. As defense minister, he played a crucial role in the 1966 coup that brought the Alawites to power. He took power for himself in late 1970.

Before 1970 Syria experienced 13 coups d'état in 21 years. The fact that Assad has managed to remain in office for over 15 years says a great deal about his political brilliance. He turned a small, poor, and volatile country into one of the dominant powers of the Middle East. Henry Kissinger and Jimmy Carter, among others, have expressed grudging admiration for Assad's skills. But everything in Syria depends on one man. The country is likely to revert to its former instability once he leaves the scene.

The Alawite community numbers about a million people—12 percent of the Syrian population—and lives mostly in the fertile northwest of Syria. The Alawite religion dates from the ninth century and derives from the Shiite rite of Islam. Its doctrines share so little with Islam, however, that mainstream Moslems traditionally view Alawites as beyond the pale, as non-Moslems. In the words of a still-influential Sunni writer of the Middle Ages, Ibn Taymiya, they are "worse than Jews or Christians, worse even than pagans." Frequently persecuted, Alawites made their faith a secret and avoided contact with the outside world.

As poorly educated peasants lacking political organization or military strength, Alawites long formed an economic underclass. They typically worked farms belonging to Sunni Arab landlords, receiving only one-quarter of the

produce. Alawites were so poor after World War I that they routinely hired out their daughters as domestics to Sunni Arabs in the cities, a deeply shameful practice among Moslems and Alawites.

When Syria became an independent country in 1946, it was naturally the Sunni Arabs who dominated its political life. Ironically, discrimination served the Alawites well during the next quarter century. Exclusion reinforced the Alawite sense of ethnic solidarity at the same time that it kept them out of the ruinous power struggles then raging among Sunni military officers. As Sunnis repeatedly purged one another, Alawites rose through the ranks.

This ascent culminated in February 1966, when a group of Alawite officers came to power in Syria's bloodiest change of government ever. In a coup d'état marked by hand-to-hand fighting around the residence of Amin al-Hafiz, the former strongman, Assad's support for the rebels was decisive in the outcome.

The impact of the Alawites' taking power can hardly be exaggerated. An Alawite ruling Syria is like an untouchable becoming maharaja in India or a Jew becoming czar in Russia—an unprecedented development shocking to the majority population. To make matters worse, the government imposed a socialist order that hampered the Sunni merchants but benefited the Alawites and other poor rural peoples. The new rulers also denigrated Islamic practices, eliminating instruction on Islam from schools and deriding religion as outdated.

ASSAD INITIALLY eased these economic and religious pressures on coming to power, thereby winning the goodwill of Sunnis. After a few years' honeymoon, however, the Sunnis were even more antagonized than before. Not only did Assad reintroduce socialism and atheism, but he initiated other policies offensive to Sunnis, such as lavishing large tracts of land on Alawite peasants. His 1976 alliance with the Maronites against the Sunnis of Lebanon aroused anger and fear among Syrian Sunnis, who devised dark conspiracy theories about Assad's intentions. They said he was preparing to break off part of Syria into a separate, Alawite-dominated state, and that he would then join with the Maronites and Zionists to repress the Sunnis.

Assad filled virtually all key positions in the military and the government with Alawites. An exact pecking order emerged: the most sensitive and powerful offices went to close relatives—two brothers, one cousin, two nephews, and a brother-in-law; somewhat lesser posts (such as the head of military intelligence) were occupied by members of Assad's tribe; and key military command positions went to other Alawites.

To oppose the regime, many Sunni Arabs joined the Moslem Brethren, an organization dedicated to establishing a government in accordance with the tenets of fundamentalist Islam. The Brethren began a campaign of assassinations against what they called the "Alawite terror state" in September 1976. Within three years their guerrilla warfare seemed on the verge of overthrowing the regime. In June 1979 the Brethren massacred over 60 cadets—almost

all Alawites—at a military school in Aleppo, and in July 1980 they nearly assassinated Assad himself. Only a bodyguard who hurled himself on an exploding grenade saved Assad's life.

When it appeared his regime might fall, Assad responded with a terrible effectiveness. He made mere membership in what he called "the Moslem Brethren gang" a capital crime and pursued its members without remorse. In early 1982 Assad attacked Brethren centers in the city of Hama with 12,000 soldiers, almost all Alawite. After shelling the city for three consecutive weeks, leveling large portions, the troops were allowed to pillage what remained. Some 30,000 Sunni Arabs—a tenth of Hama's population—lost their lives. In the words of a government official, this city of 300,000 "was reduced to the status of a village." Pictures of Hama were then shown throughout Syria as an object lesson for Assad's other enemies.

THE HAMA MASSACRE won the Alawite rulers a new lease on life. But it did not make the Sunni danger disappear, as the extraordinary number of bodyguards employed by the regime illustrates. Assad has 12,000 guards for his personal protection, his top generals have 60 guards, and prominent apologists for the regime, such as the dean of a dental school and a professor of Arabic literature, have four. Even massive repression did not permanently break the Moslem Brethren. The numerous bombs that have exploded throughout Syria in the past two months are believed to be their work.

The Alawites, a small minority, know they cannot rule indefinitely against the wishes of more than half the population. To win wider support from the Sunni Arab majority without giving it real power, the Syrian government has tried several expedients.

It claims that Sunnis enjoy full representation in the government, and it is true that a number of senior officials, such as a vice president and the defense minister, are Sunni Arabs. But Syrians know full well who actually runs the country. They understand that a highly placed Sunni politician reports to the regime, not to his own community. Should he stray, the vigilant Alawites who surround him will forestall any mischief. That Sunnis are figureheads becomes apparent in times of crisis, when Alawite unit commanders carry out tasks properly belonging to Sunni generals.

The regime also tries a variety of appeals to the Sunnis—Islam, non-sectarianism, Pan-Arabism, and Pan-Syrianism—in an effort to bring them in. But embracing Islam does little good, for Sunnis do not recognize Alawites as Moslems. Nor does the talk about the abolition of sectarian communal loyalties bring Syrians together, for the Sunnis know that one small community dominates all the others. Nor does Pan-Arabism, because Syria's experimental unity with Egypt from 1958 to 1961 was a disaster. This leaves Pan-Syrianism—the effort to unite all the regimes that made up the historic region of Syria. Pan-Syrianism serves the regime as its only instrument for courting the Sunni population.

The observant traveler entering Syria for the first time is startled as he goes through passport control and sees a military map of the country on the wall, for this map contains several obvious anomalies. It shows the province of Hatay, a part of Turkey since 1939, included in Syria. It shows the Golan Heights under Syrian control, though it has been occupied by Israel since 1967. Syria's boundaries with Lebanon and Jordan appear not as international borders but as something called "regional" borders. Israel does not even exist on this map. Instead, there is a state called Palestine. And Palestine is separated from Syria by a line designated as a "temporary" border.

The map's inaccuracies reflect the Syrian government's profound unwillingness to accept the country's reduced size. They remember that until 1920 "Syria" referred to a cultural region that stretched from Anatolia to Egypt, from Iraq to the Mediterranean Sea. In terms of today's states, it comprised Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan, plus the Gaza Strip and Hatay. This larger area is now known as Greater Syria, to distinguish it from the Syrian state.

The present borders within Greater Syria date back only to 1918-23, when Great Britain and France divided the area into many new polities. The imperial powers created these polities with an eye to helping their friends in the area, most of whom were infidels. Palestine went to the Jews, Lebanon to the Maronites, small regions to the Alawites and Druse, and Jordan to a British protégé, leaving Syria to the Sunnis. The Alawite and Druse districts were later incorporated into Syria. In the eyes of Syrian Sunnis, these were all usurpers who excluded them from their patrimony, the whole of Greater Syria.

Although the goal of uniting all these lands into Greater Syria was for many years politically dormant, it did not die. Assad revived it in 1974 at a time when domestic tensions compelled him to find an imaginative new way to build bridges to the Sunni Arabs. Since then, the Syrian regime has explicitly but quietly directed its efforts to bringing all the Arab parts of Greater Syria—Lebanon, Jordan, and the PLO—under its control.

ASSAD UNVEILED his intentions for Lebanon in 1972: "Syria and Lebanon are a single country. We are more than brothers." By early 1973 Syria had acquired a decisive say in Lebanese politics. The outbreak of civil war in Lebanon in 1975 gave Assad new opportunities. By masterfully shifting support among Lebanese factions, he extended Syrian influence. In June 1976 Syrian forces intervened in Lebanon, where they still remain. Since then, any important meeting of Lebanese politicians—including the most recent peace plan—has either taken place in Damascus or involved Syrian officials. Syria has achieved its long-sought role as Lebanon's kingmaker, benefactor, and discipliner. "You don't light a cigarette here without Syrian permission" is reported to be a common saying in the Bekaa Valley of eastern Lebanon.

In 1981 a state-run Syrian paper called Jordan an artificial country and its monarchy illegitimate. The territory Jordan controls, it said, "is the land of Syria, a part of natural

Syria." Assad followed this claim with a remarkably candid speech asserting that Jordan "was primarily established to dismember Syria. . . . The day will come, perhaps very soon, when the Jordanian people will regain their right to make decisions. . . . King Hussein will discover that we are one people and that his majesty was no more than a passing, dark, and rainless cloud in our historic march."

Assad exerts great power over Jordan by helping anti-government elements within the country and threatening to use his much larger military forces. Terror has become the principal means of intimidation. Syrian agents have attacked Jordanian diplomats in many countries. (See "The Untouchable," *TNR*, June 2.) Assad's ability to get his way with King Hussein was dramatically demonstrated in November, when the king wrote an open letter apologizing for Jordan's having harbored Syrian members of the Moslem Brethren. He also promised to throw them out of Jordan, which he did. Assad then rewarded Hussein with an invitation to Damascus, which was quickly accepted.

As for the PLO, Assad launched a campaign in 1974 claiming that "Palestine is not only a part of the Arab nation, but a principal part of southern Syria." In 1975 he proposed to merge the PLO's command with Syria's. Yasir Arafat refused, correctly seeing this as a veiled attempt to dominate the PLO. A similar offer made in 1982 was again refused. Assad caused a split in the PLO in 1983 and dominated the anti-Arafat faction that later emerged. This was organized in Damascus last year as the Palestinian National Salvation Front.

The special attention Assad devotes to winning control over Lebanon, Jordan, and the Palestinian movement makes it clear that constructing Greater Syria is the centerpiece of his foreign policy. This goal poses problems, however, for it contradicts the official ideology of Pan-Arabism. It also complicates relations with Lebanon, Jordan, and the PLO. Therefore, Damascus plays a double rhetorical game. When convenient, it denies any Pan-Syrian aspirations.

ALTHOUGH Greater Syria includes many regions, Palestine attracts most of Assad's attention. The reason is simple: there is no Palestinian polity—only the state of Israel. Israelis are not Syrian, not Arab, and not Moslem. Indeed, they are Jews, and anti-Semitism has become a powerful political force in Syria during recent decades. Fighting Israel now symbolizes Arab and Moslem resolve. Strength will be achieved, many Arabs believe, through its destruction. Anti-Zionism is the operative part of Pan-Syrianism.

Assad needs militant anti-Zionism for three reasons. First, minorities in the Arab world take little interest in the conflict against Israel. Maronites, Greek Orthodox, Druse, Shiites, Kurds, and Copts typically have more pressing concerns than whether Israel exists, expands, or disappears. So have the Alawites. Before coming to power in 1966, they ignored Israel. In a 1936 letter to the French prime minister, a number of Alawite notables (including Assad's grandfather) expressed solidarity with "those

good Jews who brought civilization and peace to the Arab-Moslems, and brought prosperity to Palestine." Sunni Arabs spin elaborate conspiracy theories around the fact that Hafez al-Assad commanded the air force in 1967 when Syria lost the Golan Heights to Israel almost without a fight. Still in the same post, they note, he withheld air cover for Syrian forces sent to help the PLO battle the Jordanian government in 1970. Combining these past events with more recent Syrian actions against the PLO, the Moslem Brethren discern "an international Jewish-Alawite conspiracy" against Sunni Moslems in general and Palestinians in particular. Indeed, they claim that "collusion between the Assad regime and the Zionist enemy" underpins the whole of Syrian foreign policy. Assad tries to eliminate these suspicions by acting more implacably anti-Zionist than the Sunnis. While Anwar Sadat could lead his country's opinion on Israel, Assad can only follow.

Second, rejecting the existence of Israel offers Assad a way to appeal to Sunni emotions. Sunnis have a special regard for Palestine; they felt most aggrieved by Israel's creation and they expect to inherit Palestine should Israel be eliminated. Standing up to Israel offers them something to think about other than the regime's ethnic composition and its domestic politics. Anti-Zionism ties the majority community to Assad's government.

Finally, anti-Zionism provides a bludgeon to hold over Syria's neighbors and to enhance Assad's power in Middle East politics. Syrian leaders argue that as "the heart of Arabism and the lungs of the Palestinian resistance," Damascus has historically guided the Arabs. Syria leads the fight against Zionism, showing the way to the other Arabs, including the Palestinians, and correcting them when they stray. Continuing the fight against Israel permits Assad to impose his will on the other Arabs.

THE SYRIAN government has unique needs, and anti-Zionism provides it with unique benefits. Bellicose relations with Israel help Hafez al-Assad stay in power and extend his influence. Refusing to accept the existence of the Jewish state provides him with a foreign enemy to unify the country, to strengthen bonds between the rulers and the ruled, and to mobilize the Sunni population. It also helps legitimate the government, divert attention from domestic conflicts, and increase Syria's regional power. Anti-Zionism has a key role in the Alawites' desperate struggle to prevent Sunni Arabs from taking back the power that their numbers and psychology demand. The minority identity and unpopular rule of the present government impel it to depend heavily on aggressive foreign policies against all its neighbors, especially Israel. Thus it stays in the fray after Israel's other neighbors have bowed out.

Assad so much needs Israel as an enemy he is willing to endure whatever costs anti-Zionism entails, including military defeat and economic sacrifice. So long as an Alawite-dominated Syrian regime faces widespread Sunni opposition, it profits by seeking Israel's destruction. The implication is clear: the Arab-Israeli conflict will continue so long as Hafez al-Assad rules in Damascus. □